

Private Idaho by CrownedKingLewis

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Summary:

“It’s okay.” El’s voice is soft and firm at the same time. Steve risks a glance in her direction, finding her round, concerned eyes. “You’re with me.”

He’s never quite sure how she does that, never really understands the extent of her powers no matter how much Dustin emphasizes every detail. But one thing he knows, from the stories he’s been told, is that she can kick ass and he’s definitely safe if she’s next to him.

Private Idaho

Author's Note:

This is a scrapped draft of something I wrote for a fic. Even though I decided not to use it I didn't want to completely throw it away so... here we are. Yet another one shot with a song by The B-52's as the title. Sue me, I fucking love them. If you're wondering why I chose Private Idaho of all songs, squint harder.

The trees are still and frozen in this part of town, hovering like lanky, spiky creatures. They're huddled together in lifeless sticks and dry bark, reaching out to the pale sunlight that breaks through the dusty clouds. The air is colder too, biting to the skin. The fog slips ominously over the few remaining leaves of green life, giving any living thing the opportunity to sneak through unnoticed.

Steve hates it, hates that he can't have a third eye on the back of his head to see what is happening when his back is exposed and vulnerable. The creeping feeling still lingers at night, when he thinks something is watching him and he can't sleep. He's always on the lookout for what's around the corner, for what's waiting for the right time to give him a frightening greeting. It makes his heart race faster when his thoughts get too jumbled to actually rest, the dark circles under his eyes prominent and obvious.

The scenery outside passes his window quietly, reminding him of how much he can't stand silence. If he squints hard enough, he swears he can see demodogs creeping through the fog, their faces opening to reveal a mess of sharp teeth and slimy saliva.

A small hand rests on his wrist, warm and comforting, and it takes him a moment to register it wasn't the same as Dustin's death grip on him when they were in the monster infested tunnels. When Steve looks, he notices his knuckles are white around the steering wheel, so tight it's squeaking. He automatically loosens his grip, letting a shuddery sigh come through his nose, and keeps his eyes on the empty road ahead.

“It’s okay.” El’s voice is soft and firm at the same time. Steve risks a glance in her direction, finding her round, concerned eyes. “You’re with me.”

He’s never quite sure how she does that, never really understands the extent of her powers no matter how much Dustin emphasizes every detail. But one thing he knows, from the stories he’s been told, is that she can kick ass and he’s definitely safe if she’s next to him.

The thing about El is that he never feels like he has to hide from her like he does with the rest. She’s got that knowing look, the one that reminds him she was an experiment once, parentless, her only “fatherly” figure a deranged, fucked up scientist. El always treats him like he has all reason to be afraid and angry, when he hadn’t even suffered half as much as she did. It scares him a little, how strong and independent she is at her age. When Steve can’t even help having a bit of a crisis when trying to decide which Jell-O pops to pick.

“Sorry, kid.” Steve apologizes, offering a lopsided smile that feels a little bit too tight on his face. “It’s fine, really.”

El’s eyes narrow a bit, her eyebrows stiff. “Don’t lie.” Her voice sounds older, somehow. “Friends don’t lie.”

She has a habit of saying that, sounds a bit like a parrot each time. But it has proven to be the first thing she argues about when he gets like this. For what’s worth, he’s at least touched that she thinks of him as a friend.

He doesn’t answer with a witty remark this time, feels too worn out to actually worm his way out of El scowling him for his poor life choices.

El keeps an eye on him the rest of the ride, tapping her knees to the rhythm of *I Love Rock n’ Roll*. That tape is the one thing she listens to since Christmas, when Steve struggled to get her something because he had no idea what she even liked, and ended up nailing it simply by remembering the first time he saw her. What kid with smudged eyeliner and slicked back hair wearing a black blazer wouldn’t like Joan Jett?

The snow is thicker by the time they reach Hopper's cabin, the sight a bit pale and eerie. El hesitates to pop out of her seatbelt until they're parked, something Steve gave her shit about the third time she did that while he was still driving. Sometimes he wishes Dustin would learn as quickly as she did, that shithead still tries to hurry out of the car while it was still fucking *moving*. It has taken a lot of Steve's willpower not to slap him harder than he already did on the back of his head.

El huddles into her little sheepskin coat, the one that looks similar to Nancy's, before she grabs her rucksack and reaches for the door handle.

"Hey," Steve says pointedly, watching her tense then turn to him with an expectant look. The small curl of her lips tells him she knows exactly what he's going to say; it's almost amusing. "I'm cooking you some food, actual food. Not that frozen shit you clog your intestines with."

El's eyes narrow with annoyance, up until she perks up a little. "Intestines?"

"Yeah," He unzips his puffer jacket to grab at the little belly fat he has through his shirt, jiggling it a bit. "You know, intestines?"

Steve cackles when El lets out a disgusted sound and whips her head around, her curls bouncing, scurrying to get out of the car as if Steve's humor pains her.

Their little routine plays itself without much hassle: El wordlessly goes to turn on the heat in the freezing cabin, throwing her rucksack on the couch and pulling off her shoes with her toes. Steve rummages through the fridge to check out what they have, only to remind himself that he should just do the groceries for Hopper instead. The one thing that changes is that El doesn't make a beeline for the TV, instead plops down on the couch and looks for her notebook, the clicking of pencils echoing in the small living room.

Steve opts for throwing together a Frankenstein noodle soup (with various ingredients he won't admit are actually frozen) before he calls Hopper, testing how long the phone cord actually reaches and

walking far enough to grab a shady looking can of beans to squint at the label.

Hopper answers the call on the second ring, though the first thing Steve hears is a string of curses and a sound of something falling on the floor.

“Chief Hopper speaking.”

Steve holds back a laugh at how absolutely emotionless Hopper sounds. “Yeah, listen. I had these sweet pair of shinny gnomes on my front yard? They’ve gone missin’.”

“Oh, fuck off.” There’s no real heat in his words. Funny enough, now Hopper actually sounds more like a living human being rather than a lifeless machine. Steve imagines he’s answered the phone so many times he must already know how everyone’s voice sounds. “You pick Jane up?”

“Yeah.” Steve spares a glance towards the couch, the back of El’s curly bed of hair facing him. She’s focused on something he can’t see. “Also, would you please consider buying food that looks appetizing and edible one day? I don’t know how you expect me to feed Jane something healthy if you don’t actually have anything healthy.”

“What are you looking at?”

“A can of whatever the fuck this is.” Steve mutters while he inspects the can of beans a little further. He places it back on the kitchen counter with a discouraged sigh. “Any special requests? Hide the eggs? Lock the door when I leave? Take the TV away?” Without looking, Steve can feel El’s eyes burning on the side of his face.

Hopper snorts loudly. “Actually, I do.”

There’s something in Hopper’s voice that changes, but Steve can’t quite tell what it is. He straightens his back a bit, eyebrows knitting together.

“I can’t keep locking her away, Steve.” So that’s what it is: resignation. It’s a feeling Steve is all too familiar with. “There’s only so much I can do to keep her safe, but she’s gonna be out there on

her own eventually. Look what happened when I gave her too much shit.”

Steve’s has heard about four versions of the same story. If there’s one thing they have in common, it is that El saves the day at the end with her *cool superpowers*.

Hopper inhales, his nose wheezing into the receiver. “Would you mind babysitting her after she gets out of school? It’s only ‘til I get out of work. I’ll pay you a few bucks, name the price. I just don’t want her locked in there on her own anymore.”

“That’s your version of giving her freedom?” Steve says jokingly, but he takes the request with some surprise. It took Hopper a long time to warm up to the idea of even letting El go to school like the rest of the kids her age. The poor man gets this haunted look in his eyes whenever El asks if she can hang out with her friends, like she may just try to run away again and never come back. Steve understands, in a way. He always gets this feeling of dread when the kids talk of bicycling through Hawkins to waste the day away, like they used to, before Will went missing.

“I mean, sure. Whatever. Not like I already struggle to feed her so she grows healthy and strong.”

“Harrington—“

“Don’t pay me anything.” Steve interrupts, hand on his hip. “There’s no need. I would give up my life for those punks.”

Hopper is silent on the other line, his breathing a bit heavy. If it weren’t for that fact that Steve can’t see him, he would think Hopper was trying to avoid sounding emotional. “I know.”

The tables are suddenly reversed, leaving Steve feeling a bit shaky. Memories of him rushing the kids to get out of the tunnels flood his mind, of Billy beating the shit out of him, his consciousness slowly darkening, of a demodog opening up its face and screeching at him before he takes a wild swing with his bat.

“So I take her home now or what?” He’s trying to conceal the slight

tremble of his voice. El's been listening to his side of the conversation the whole time, he knows from when he saw her shift from the corner of his eyes and then gone suspiciously still.

"Nah," There's another sigh. "Wanna talk to her first. 'Bout damn time I did."

"Sure." Steve picks up the can of beans just to keep his hands busy, reads the label again, but doesn't register what it says. "Can I drop the call now? I've got a child to feed."

There's a short huff of laughter on the other line. Steve doesn't know how he can actually feel Hopper rolling his eyes. From a distant, he thinks he hears something along the lines of 'pain in the ass' before the call drops, the line going dead.

As he pulls the phone away from his ear, Steve looks at El to find her staring directly at him. Her eyes widen a bit, pausing on whatever it was she planned on doing, which he presumes was play dumb and look the other way. The tension on her shoulders falters a bit when he offers an easy smile, putting the phone back on the handset. "What are you up to?" He approaches her, leaning over the outside back of the couch.

El's eyes brighten a bit, her small hands fumbling to pick up the notebook from where it rests on the mess on her lap, pencils rolling to the side and papers falling around her. "Help with homework?"

Steve reaches to hold it, squinting at the first paper and making a disgusted sound when he spots a good amount of complicated numbers. "What's this? Math or some shit?"

Author's Note:

Follow me on Tumblr if you'd like: <http://benalras.tumblr.com/> (ONLY IF YOU TOLERATE HARRIGROVE BECAUSE THAT IS ALL IT IS AS OF 2018 LOL)